

# DNF in the Race to Change Higher Education

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In racing lingo, “DNF” stands for “Did Not Finish.” Unless getting to the finish line is a simple straight-line drag race, winning a race takes a lot more than horsepower and can be as dependent upon: brakes that allow the highest approach speeds to corners, suspension and downforce that keep the car on the track while navigating corners, and a support crew that can change tires and add gas faster than the other teams. It is as important to know when to throttle back as it is to throttle forward.

Change management can be a complicated task in any industry, but higher education is a particularly complex course to navigate, where the driver is not the only one with access to the brakes, and the officials can change the rules without notice.

While some may object to characterizing change in higher education as a race, the reality is that higher education is in the midst of change, and institutions that cannot adapt to the competitive realities fast enough may not survive. Unless your institution’s mission is no longer relevant or you believe others can serve that mission better than you, then like it or not, you are in a virtual race.

A 2021 Bloomberg opinion piece by economist Noah Smith put it this way: “Schools need to find new ways to pay the bills or risk going under ... devastation of the higher education sector seems to be one prophecy that is coming true.”

This is hardly new thinking. In February 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled “U.S. Colleges Are Separating Into Winners and Losers.” And back in 2011, Clay Christensen made the bold prediction that half of all colleges would close or go bankrupt in 10 to 15 years in his book, *The Innovative University: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. Christensen, who died last year, had reiterated that belief in 2017 in a speech [covered](#) by *Inside Higher Ed*.

## **What makes higher ed unique**

Even in the midst of all the various prophecies and demographic realities, change for change's sake is like spinning your wheels; it uses up energy and gets you nowhere. In fact, one reason change may not make it to the finish line is that the planned change was ill-conceived or misguided from the outset. Or perhaps circumstances develop that supersede the need or value of the planned change. Still, assuming the planned change is strategically sound, then ensuring it makes it to the finish line in a higher ed environment, requires an understanding of what it is that makes change in higher education unique.

In the management book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, Jim C. Collins writes that it can be as important to get the right people off the bus as on the bus. While this has to be done within the confines of employment agreements and laws, it is generally within management's prerogatives to make structural changes, reorganize and otherwise direct personnel changes. The personnel changes made within an organization in most industries rarely have more than marginal impact on constituents outside the organization. Provided a sound change management plan exists that keeps essential tasks from falling through the cracks, consumers of products rarely know who actually built which parts of their product. Even in service environments, consumers don't typically request a particular flight attendant, hotel concierge or delivery driver and aren't likely to switch providers based on a personnel change if the quality of the service does not fall.

Yet, in the case of higher education institutions, there's no shortage of stories about student protest, alumni backlash and faculty votes of no confidence when it comes to personnel decisions deemed inappropriate within an academic institution. Nikole Hannah-Jones is one of the latest examples of the backlash that can happen when decisions run counter to the judgment and ethos of the larger institution community. Her story also exemplifies that sometimes in higher education, it is the larger community that ultimately drives the change.

## **Faculty voice**

Shared governance has been a hallmark of higher education institutions and is engrained in nearly every aspect of an institution's operations, from selecting a president to determining which day graduation will take place. While there are countless definitions and interpretations as to what shared governance actually means, the fact is that the concept of faculty involvement in the direction and operation of an institution is embedded in the ethos of higher education. While the locus of power within institutions of higher education may shift a few degrees one way or the other, the expectations among faculty (and reinforced by most accreditors) is that faculty should have a strong voice in strategic matters. Failure to recognize the influence and expectations that stem from shared governance can result in a cascade of consequences. This is not to say that significant change will always be stymied by shared governance; it simply means that change plans need to account for this difference. An environment of trust and communication are central to building support.

Building a case for change that results in faculty support is itself complicated by several factors. First, whether you are a public or private institution, a core tenant of virtually all higher education institutions is academic freedom (that typically translates into freedom of speech

expectations). That means that issues most organizations would prefer to keep confidential—such as concerns over financial solvency, personnel cuts or strategic plans—are far more likely to become public knowledge. In fact, accreditors expect both faculty and staff to be completely honest and open with them, and if you are a public institution, legislators will expect the same openness and honesty with them. In fact, most public institutions are subject to right-to-know requests and often post their meeting minutes online. What this means for change efforts is that plans may be public before they are fully baked, and the result may be greater resistance. For example, restructuring in a way that will result in the elimination of positions can create widespread anxiety and resistance, even when the actual change may be highly focused and could be based largely on attrition. If the message is simply that there will be position eliminations, it will be harder to advance those plans.

Another major area of difference between higher education and most other industry sectors is education itself. Faculty, as well as many administrators, generally hold terminal degrees. They are experts in their field and they are often the most knowledgeable person in the room when it comes to their particular area within their discipline. They are also trained to question and conduct their own research and analysis. While few will be specifically trained in higher education strategy or organizational development in general, you can count on everyone having their own perspective and those perspectives will vary as much as the disciplines they're educated in.

Embracing and engaging this varied expertise within the institution can lead to the identification of unintended consequences, a recognition of adverse impacts and ultimately creative solutions. The goal does not always need to be obtaining consensus, but rather building trust through transparency, strengthening ideas and plans through input, and ultimately building a critical mass of support, or at least lowering the temperature and resistance to strategic changes. Involving faculty in the development of a process for engagement and identifying faculty champions can mean the difference between success and failure.

### **Political hurdles for publics**

Public institutions face an additional political hurdle when it comes to making significant changes. While it is not unheard of for politicians to get involved when a company proposes massive layoffs or plant closings, the bar for politicians to be engaged in the change plans of public colleges or systems tends to be far lower. While private institutions are not immune to political forces, particularly from their immediate communities, public institutions rely more heavily on funding, are subject to right-to-know laws, and are in general more impacted by legislative engagement. For example, legislators across New England have been directly involved in discussions and decisions regarding mergers, closures or consolidations of public institutions even though each state has established governing boards or agencies responsible for oversight. The reality is that it is very unlikely that a public institution could close or merge campuses without legislative engagement, whether the need for their involvement is in statute or not.

Complicating the political dynamics is the fact that even if legislators don't have their own opinion on proposed institutional changes, it is likely that constituents will, and the legislators will respond to their constituents. For example, the proposed closing of a public college in New

England two years ago not only spurred outcry from potentially impacted employees, but also from current students and alumni who together represented thousands of constituents demanding legislative intervention. Ultimately, millions of dollars were directed to the system in order to hold off on the closure and study the issue further. I am hard-pressed to think of another industry where past consumers would engage their legislators in an organization's decision to the degree that alumni will influence changes to their alma mater, and some of those alums are likely to be legislators themselves. Even changing a logo or eliminating a team sport can galvanize the interest of the media and alums.

None of this is to say that legislators should not be involved. Public institutions are creatures of the legislature and require significant investment and ultimately have broad impact on their communities. But it does complicate the change process. As with the internal community, public institutions need to apply the same principles of trust through transparency and early engagement when it comes to building support (or lowering resistance) among political actors. It is also important to understand the larger political dynamics between the various political actors (the timing of whom to engage and in what order can be as important as the message itself).

The challenges of making big change happen within institutions of higher education do not diminish the need for change. However, it is important to add some context. Returning to the racing analogy, this is not a winner-take-all race. It is more like a qualifier. Successfully finishing may be all that's needed to survive, and the reality is that very few of those in the race to change have much experience at it. A 2013 *Forbes* article titled "The Imminent Shakeout? Disruptive Innovation and Higher Education" described higher ed institutions as "one of the most stable institutions ever derived by humankind. Second perhaps only to religion." That kind of stability does not lend itself to structures designed for big rapid change. Higher ed institutions have survived through ongoing incremental change and many will be unable to adjust to anything beyond incremental. However, for those able to adapt and finish near the front of the pack the rewards can go well beyond mere survival.

This all brings me to a final unique issue affecting change efforts in higher education: the fact that the dire predictions of shakeouts have persisted long enough that there is the worry of crying wolf, whether the wolf in question was the introduction of online technology, MOOCs, for-profits, micro-credentialing or the recent pandemic. I suspect that higher education as a whole has become numb to calls for change. Instilling a sense of urgency will not be easy. Nonetheless, the demographics are real, and federal funds have merely provided a longer glide path to get beyond the impacts of the pandemic.

The reality is that colleges are closing and merging—it may simply be a slower process than Christensen and others, accustomed to non-higher ed industries, are familiar with, which may be making this a quieter shakeout. As *Higher Ed Dive* notes: Since 2016, 67 colleges have closed, merged or announced plans to.

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